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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the role that enterprise-based teachers play in attempting to induct workers on the periphery of the global economy into the discourses of the global marketplace. It focuses on the micro-politics of language, arguing that economic globalization is a social achievement that generates and requires new language and literacy practices. Workplace language and literacy practice changes to accommodate the demands of global networks of accountability (for instance, various quality documentation mechanisms) and associated management structures like cross functional teams and these changes have a significant impact on work practice, work identities and constructions of working knowledge. Enterprise-based language and literacy teachers can be implicated in the social and political processes by which new working identities and new working knowledges are constructed. The paper draws on an intensive 8-month study of a restructuring textile manufacturing company as the company attempts simultaneously to achieve a QS 9000 rating, to establish a cascading set of cross functional teams, and to implement an Action Learning Team training program. (Author/RS)

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'Working' knowledge and 'Working' identities: learning and teaching the new word order of the new work order.

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the role that enterprise based teachers play in attempting to induct workers on the periphery of the global economy into the discourses of the global marketplace. It focusses on the micro-politics of language, arguing that economic globalisation is a social achievement that generates, and requires, new language and literacy practices. Workplace language and literacy practice changes to accommodate the demands of global networks of accountability (for instance, various Quality documentation mechanisms) and associated management structures like cross functional teams and these changes have a significant impact on work practice, work identities and constructions of working knowledge. Enterprise based language and literacy teachers can be implicated in the social and political processes by which new working identities and new working knowledges are constructed. The paper draws on an intensive eight month study of a restructuring textile manufacturing company as the company attempts simultaneously to achieve a QS 9000 rating, to establish a cascading set of cross functional teams and to implement an Action Learning Team training program.

Introduction

A prominent feature of the contemporary workplace seeking to engage with the global economy is the emergence of what Fairclough calls the 'discourse technologist' (1996:73ff). Discourse technologists are 'expert outsiders', people who are in workplaces (for a time, at least) but not of them. Fariclough points
to two distinguishing features of discourse technologists. The first is their relationship to knowledge. Discourse technologists are 'experts', usually but not
always in the social sciences, who have access to 'privileged' scientific information. Their interventions in discursive practices carry the 'aura of truth'. The
second is their relationship to institutions. Discourse technologists 'hold accredited roles, associated with accredited practices and routines' in institutions.
They are involved in activities like 'staff development', activities which entail training employees in a variety of discursive practices. Although their

specific roles in local institutions vary, they have generic functions. The first is to 'shift the policing of discourse practices from the local to the transnational level (1996:73). The second is to shift the basis of legitimacy of policing agents within institutions. This entails a shift from legitimacy based on 'power and prestige within an institution' to legitimacy based on 'science, knowledge and truth'. In other words, what discourse technologists have in common is that they are employed to actively intervene in the discursive construction of knowledge and identity in local workplaces in ways that will reduce the influence of persistent local discourses and increase the influence of emerging transnational discourses. Discourse technologists are agents of economic globalisation.

In many ways workplace educators can be considered prototypical 'discourse technologists'. They are 'expert outsiders', coming and going in workplaces on a contractual basis with highly specific briefs. Sometimes they are required to prepare workers for certification (like the base level Vehicle Builders Certificate). At other times they are employed to deliver targeted programs in, for instance, Occupational Health and Safety. Workplace educators are generally understood to be concerned with developing the skills and competencies of workers in the restructuring workplace. They are acknowledged as agents of globalisation, but only in so far as they are understood to be increasing the skill base of workers and so contributing to the development of the educated, flexible workforce Australia needs if it is to attract the business of global companies. While this may, and usually does, involve intervention in the discursive practices of work, this has been seen as incidental, the explicit focus of the work is generally understood to be concerned with increasing the skill base of the workforce.

The local site

The local site I am concerned with here is Australian Fabric Manufacturers (AFM), an Australian textile manufacturing company located on three sites, two in metropolitan Melbourne and one in a regional city about an hour's drive from Melbourne. The original AFM was established in the 1930s and it has taken over several smaller companies over the years. It remains one of the larger local textile manufacturing companies but it's survival is not assured and it is under increasing pressure to globalise its operations as local markets dry up in the face of cheaper imports. AFM now concentrates on the production of industrial textiles, mostly for the global automotive market. At

the time this study was undertaken AFM was undergoing the latest in a number of organizational restructures. With the help of federal government funding the company had employed two enterprise based literacy teachers who are charged with the responsibility of developing cross functional teams. The focus of this paper is a brief exchange in a team meeting designed to establish the Eight Step Problem Solving teams mandated by a major customer, Autoco.

The remote insitution

Autoco is large and well known global automotive company with its head office in the United States. It now outsources many of what were previously core functions (like the building of engines and chassises) to manufacturing companies all over the world. Autoco has contracted AFM to provide specified automotive textiles to its assembly plants in the Southern hemisphere. AFM could not survive for long without Autoco's custom but it is by no means assured.

Autoco has a problem. While there are many potential economic advantages to outsourcing component production, there are also potential risks. The most critical risk is that the company will effectively relinquish control of its product when it loses control of people who produce it. The challenge is to retain control of the people who produce the product while avoiding assuming the responsibilities of day to day control of their operations and thus losing the advantages of outsourcing component production.

Staff in the engineering department at Autoco in the USA have developed a Quality Manual which describes what they regard as 'best practice' in work organisation, team building and problem solving. The manual mandates certain practices, not just for Autoco but for all companies who wish to be considered as regular Autoco suppliers. Autoco requires that management at AFM put specific organisational structures in place, and that they ensure that employees adopt specific work practices. Autoco polices this process in two ways. First, it requires that AFM file an annual report detailing the way in which it complies with the mandated practices. This report is scored and if AFM falls below a certain score than Autoco will be violating its own Quality assurance procedures if it continues to do business. Second, every two years representatives from Autoco Head Office come to AFM to

observe work organisation and work practice and assure themselves of the veracity of the claims. In this was Autoco and AFM establish the 'routine' connections between the local site and the remote institution that economic globalisation demands.

In this paper I consider first what it means to shift the policing of discursive practice and the legitimacy of policing agents from local to remote institutions. I then look at a specific instance in an attempt to see how this shift might be achieved. Finally, I look at the implications for workplace educators and workplace education.

Shifting the locus of control from the local to the remote

One of the most interesting questions to ask about a shift in control from the local to the global is why a global corporation like Autoco would want to effect such a shift. In fact it seems more likely that the opposite would be the case, that global businesses would be seeking to shift control to local sites. The popular rhetoric about economic globalisation stresses the importance of immediate responses to fragmented niche markets all over the world. Businesses everywhere, it is argued, must be in a position to respond to problems as they are forming, and needs as they are emerging. This instant responsiveness assumes a business structure that is devolved and decentred in terms of function and authority; it assumes a flatter, cross functional team based structure rather than a traditional management hierarchy. Such a structure presupposes the 'autonomous professional' (Hammer 1996), a worker who is trained and authorised to make important decisions at the local site with knowledge of local conditions and local opportunities. In a situation like this we may well expect any interventions in the discursive practice of work to be designed to shift control to the local site, promoting team work and local decision making and problem solving.

Global businesses like Autoco are in a bind, they want to be responsive to business opportunities in a highly competitive market, but they do not wish to relinquish centralised control. They accept that they must give up direct day to day control over decision making but they attempt to diminish the importance of this explicit control by attempting to exert control over the

discursive construction of working identities and work practices (du Gay, Farrell in press a).

The simplest way to achieve these aims is by shifting the policing of discursive practices from the local to the remote institution. This is not a difficult thing to achieve in the contemporary workplace. Standardised 'Quality' frameworks attempt to achieve this policing by certifying certain organisations as having adopted 'best practice' and these organisations must regularly demonstrate their commitment to these standardised practices if they are to retain their certification. In addition, large global companies like Autoco develop their own Quality manuals and demand that their supplier companies adopt the specialized work structures and problem solving practices that have been developed by the parent company. Local workplaces like AFM are 'caught in a web of documentation' (Foucault) that controls work practice and ensures that global companies like Autoco can exercise the surveillance they demand.

It is a more difficult matter to shift legitimacy of the policing agent from the local to the remote. Legitimacy is established in a web of formal and informal narratives in local workplaces. In many respects legitimacy is not fixed, it is always being contested and negotiated. It determines what counts as working knowledge at local workplaces at specific times and this in turn determines such specific material benefits as formal workplace hierarchies, wage and salary levels and status and authority. When discourse technologists attempt to shift the policing agents from the local to the remote they are, therefore, doing far more than merely trying to change the locus of control from the local to the remote. Almost incidentally, they threaten to disrupt complex local systems of esteem and reward that rely on the objectivisation of professional knowledge.

I want to look now at one moment when these systems become unstable as a workplace educator, acting as a discourse technologist, attempts to shift the legitimacy of the policing agent from the local to the remote. It is not surprising that she encounters a kind of static. Elsewhere (Farrell 1999, Farrell forthcoming) I have talked about the 'noisiness' of contemporary workplace texts, arguing that they are telling instances of what Bahktin calls 'dialogic heteroglossia', and I won't go into that here, except to reiterate that discourses are always in dynamic and hierarchical relationship with each other at local sites and that this implies friction and struggle. It is not as easy as it might seem to shift claims of legitimacy.

'Working' knowledge and 'working' identity

In this transcript segment Bill is invited to describe the work that he has done in claiming the expenditure of $20,000 on new equipment for the warping shed. He describes working with Margaret (another workplace educator) to do the calculations on which the claim is based:

Bill Yeah. Me and Margaret, yeah, got together and I've worked out quite a bit lost downtime and costing unloading

While Bill acknowledges Margaret as a co-worker on the project he clearly identifies himself as primary in the process of knowledge production (I've worked out. . .)

Sally immediately raises the question:

Sally To what extent are you following the framework of that, that 8 step guideline that Andy put out originally in that, in the book where particularly step 7 where its got the action plan and its got um Who? When? Where? and so on. Are you using those at all?

There are a number of points to note about this question. First, Sally is intervening directly and explicitly in the discursive production of knowledge, rejecting Bill's formulation and ignoring the substantive issues Bill raises (lost downtime etc). Second, although framed as a question her comment asserts the primacy of the written text, and of a specific generic structure. Third, the '8 step guideline' to which she refers is a problem solving protocol mandated bythe remote institution, Autoco. Autoco demands that local supplier companies provide written evidence that protocols like the one Sally describes here have been adopted (Farrell 1999a).

Sally is explicitly 'shift [ing] the policing of discourse practices from the local to the transnational level'. In doing so she is also intervening to shift the basis of legitimacy within AFM from Bill's claim ('I've worked out)' to

a highly generalised claim to 'science, knowledge and truth' ('Who? When? Where?') as it is formulated in an Eight Step Problem Solving Plan.

Bill, however, explicitly rejects this shift. Calling on traditional workplace discourses he asserts the primacy of embodied knowledge and himself as the 'primary knower' (Berry 1981).

Bill No, I'm just using this one [points to his head].

Sally does not persist with her alternative here

Sally yeah [Margaret]

and Matt acts as mediator

Matt Baz filled one in.

It is interesting to see the way that Matt repositions the abstract, written, Eight Step Plan in this brief turn. First, he reassigns responsibility for formulating knowledge in this way away from Bill to Bill's colleague, Baz. In doing so he implies that the knowledge producer does not need to be the person who writes the knowledge down. He separates the intellectual work (working it out) from the act of writing (fill[ing] one in). Second, he discounts the importance of the plan in the processes of knowledge production by referring to it as a form, not a structure for problem solving, merely paperwork. Sally picks up this reference in her next turn:

Sally Ah, yeah. So you following that paperwork there?

Bill emphasises the distinction between knowledge production and the production of an externally mandated written text by disclaiming any knowledge of the Eight Step Plan, locating that responsibility with Margaret, the workplace literacy educator:

. . .

Bill Yeah. I don't know. Are you Margaret?
[loud laughter]

and Sally accepts this distinction, for the moment:

Sally I'm sorry, I've asked the wrong person

It is not writing itself that is the issue for Bill here, however, although both Matt and Sally have expressed the view that Bill's literacy skills 'aren't up to it':

Bill I'm just writing it all out and giving it to Margaret. That's all.

Bill writes frequently in other aspects of his work and has written out his calculations and his arguments. He regards this writing as private, however, an aid to 'working it out'. He gives the texts to Margaret to transform his knowledge into the public, abstracted, and, to him, irrelevant, Eight Step Plan.

'Working' knowledge and identity

Now I want to look briefly at how the transcript I have presented above can be seen as an instance in which the participants are 'working' locally established discourses about what counts as knowledge and what counts as working identity. When I use the term 'working' here the metaphors I am trying to evoke are those of 'working' clay in pottery making or 'working' dough in bread making. I'm trying to capture the malleability, but also the structural limits of the material; the way in which we take a substance with specific properties and 'work' it into something with a specific form and function. I want to capture that tension between structure and agency. My argument is that, in contexts like the team meeting, we vigorously 'work' the available discourses to shape knowledge and identity moment by moment. These concepts are in a constant state of transformation. As I have pointed out earlier, there are many discourses available in a heteroglossic site like a contemporary workplace. Sometimes the participants work the discourses in concert to construct plausible local working knowledges and working identities (Farrell in press a), often they don't. Team meetings like this one can be 'sites of struggle' around available working identities precisely because so much is at stake.

I take as my starting point in this discussion Ezzamel and Willmott's (1998) argument that team work represents a threat to the narrative of self and to

take this further to argue that any challenge to the way that knowledge is constituted at local sites represents a challenge to identiites. I want to argue that, in this section of the transcript, Sally is clearly acting as a discourse technologist in so far as she is attempting to shift the policing of discourse practice from the local site of AFM to the remote site of Autoco via the documentation required by the Autoco Quality Manual. I think she succeeds in this, at least to the extent that the group as a whole (although not Bill) will provide an approximation of the discourse practice that Autoco demands.

However, I want to argue further that Sally is attempting to effect a shift from legitimacy based on 'power and prestige within an institution' (i.e. Bill) to legitimacy based on 'science, knowledge and truth' (i.e. the Eight Step Plan) and in this endeavor she is somewhat less successful.

The segment of the team meeting that is presented here represents a particularly acute moment in a struggle overworking knowledge and working identity. The importance of the moment is signalled when Bill uses the term 'costing'(line 3). 'Costing' is a passivisation (Fairclough 1992: 27). A passivisation transforms 'I worked out how much it cost' into 'the costing is'. The salient feature here is that passivisation obscures agency – the person who produced the knowledge is stripped from the text. In this case the term 'costing' is used by Matt and others to refer to the written account of what a particular process, plan or innovation will cost. It usually refers to a written description in which the calculations are spelled out in routine ways, but it may also be used to refer to calculations as if they existed in a routine documentary form (what would the costing be for that?). It is a term used most commonly in management discourses drawing on accounting and systems management so it is not surprising that it was introduced by Matt, in an earlier meeting. It is however, a term rarely heard on the shop floor, until recently. It is not that people on the shop floor did not perform calculations, or present those calculations to their supervisors. At AFM at least, people in Bill's position have always done that and Bill has taken pride in his ability to make a clear financial argument to his superiors. In this transcript Bill uses a number of active formulations:

I've worked out quite a bit ' (line 2)
I'm using this one (line 8)
I'm just writing it all out (line 18)

I find its too awkward for Margaret (line 31)
I can give her the right times (line 36)

In each case he stresses his individual agency by placing himself first in the clause (I) as well as stating it explicitly in lines 31-36. Passivisation does not come easily to Bill, yet passivisation is a critical demand of Autoco's Quality Manual and of the discourse of the Action Learning team. This is no accident, passivisation reassigns knowledge away from individuals to groups or unidentified individuals. It represents a direct to challenge to Bill's 'narrative of self ' – the way he constitutes himself as a tradesman and as a senior person in the workplace – a primary agent of legitimation.

Passivisation also, I would argue, poses a direct challenge to the way that knowledge is constituted at AFM – it 'works' knowledge so that it assumes, in Fairclough's terms, the status of 'science, knowledge and truth'.

Conclusion

I've been focussing here on the micropolitics of language, on the way that Sally and Margaret, operating as a workplace educators and as a discourse technologists, intervene in the discursive practice of the workers at AFM in explicit and targeted ways. It would not be difficult for Sally and Margaret to argue that what they are doing here is teaching the literacy practices required of companies like AFM who operate on the periphery of the global economy, that their aim is to increase the literacy repertoires of workers at AFM and that it is, therefore, entirely benign. I think I've demonstrated with this transcript, however, that this particular intervention, aimed at shifting the policing of discourse practice from the local to the remote, is potentially disruptive of whole systems of knowledge and identity that operate at AFM.

However, I think I have also demonstrated that it is no easy matter to shift the basis of legitimacy from the local to the remote and that Bill and other workers like Matt and Baz, and even discourse technologists like Margaret, will at times collude to 'work' the discourses in such a way that established bases of legitimacy are not entirely dismissed, although they may do this at considerable cost.

Sally and Margaret are old fashioned workplace educators but they are also newly prominent discourse technologists, critical actors in the global economy, especially in places like Australia, on the periphery of the global economy, which carry the burden of discursive shifts. In this context workplace education is radically redefined.

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[i] Names of people and organizations have been changed.

[ii] The project on which this discussion draws is the Textual Practice of Competence Project, funded by the Australian Research Council. A more detailed account of the project can be found in Farrell in press a.